



4-15-1993

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DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13023/DISCLOSURE.02.13>

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### Recommended Citation

Pinsky, Mike (1993) "Evidence of History: Hyperreality and Walt Disney World," *disClosure: A Journal of Social Theory*. Vol. 2 , Article 13.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.13023/DISCLOSURE.02.13>

Available at: <https://uknowledge.uky.edu/disclosure/vol2/iss1/13>

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**Evidence of History:  
Hyperreality and Walt Disney World**

by Mike Pinsky  
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"It is no longer a question of imitation, nor of reduplication, nor even of parody. It is rather a question of substituting signs of the real for real itself..."

—Jean Baudrillard (4)

Baudrillard speaks of the nature of simulation and mentions Disneyland by name. Underlying simulation is the concept of the genetic: the ordering of elements to mask an originary position, the process of reproduction. The center, implicitly self-affective and stable, generates the outside, severing the simulation from itself: "No more imaginary coextensivity: rather genetic miniaturization is the dimension of simulation" (Baudrillard 3). The simulation is then both consistent with itself and its origin, which it reinscribes in miniaturized form.

Thus is the pattern of history as well, or so says Hegel: "The outcome is the same as the beginning only because the beginning is an end" (quoted in de Man, *Allegories* 80). It is fair to read the generation of simulacra as a writing of literary texts, in the sense that literature is conventionally suspended from, yet still referentially dependent on, a valuation of historical origin (de Man, *Allegories* 79). History of literature, literature of history—both have the same structure, which leads to an intriguing question:

Could we conceive of a literary history that would not truncate literature by putting us misleadingly *into* or outside it, that would be able to maintain the literary aporia throughout, account at the same time for the truth and falsehood of the knowledge literature conveys about itself, distinguish rigorously between metaphorical and historical language, and account for literary modernity as well as for its historicity? (de Man, *Blindness* 164)

Nietzsche answered this question by equating history with tragedy. The stable Apollo is undermined by the chaos of the Dionysian at origin and end. The genetic consistency of history is then opened by deconstructing the unity between the assertions of presence, easy enough to do given the already open-



ended nature of Dionysus. However, this analysis implicates the bias of all conventional history, that the stable origin must be privileged and that the present can reproduce it only in miniature. Simulation, as Baudrillard defines it, appears related to the pattern. The present can only reconstruct the territory as a map, and the map is not the territory.

And yet, simulation can reach a stage where the map may precede the territory: "Simulation is no longer that of a territory, a referential being or a substance. It is the generation of models of a real without origin or reality: a hyperreal" (Baudrillard 2). Hyperreality is simulation which creates and inscribes its own origin, giving self-affective authority to itself. The inscription masks itself as reinscription, mimicking the pattern of genetic history. But beneath the mask, the territory, the origin, is the map.

So we have a map: Merriweather Adam Pleasure. Born July 4, 1873. Presumed lost at sea, 1941. So states four different historical accounts, one with the added authority of "Jasper W. Linedozer, Semi-Official Pleasure Island Historian" ("Unauthorized History" 1). But we are getting ahead of ourselves here. If we are to address the history of Pleasure Island in detailed fashion with regard to de Man's question, then we should first explore the use of historiography in general at Walt Disney World. The issue of simulation has been discussed in the past with reference to the Magic Kingdom, and here Baudrillard's specific comments on Disneyland come into play:

The Disneyland imaginary is neither true nor false; it is a deterrence machine set up in order to rejuvenate in reverse the fiction of the real. Whence the debility, the infantile degeneration of this imaginary. It is meant to be an infantile world, in order to make us believe that the adults are elsewhere, in the "real" world, and to conceal the fact that real childishness is everywhere. . . (26)

Disneyland and its "corrected" reproduction, the Magic Kingdom at Walt Disney World, reverse the conventional process of simulation by establishing a set of origins whose precedents exist only as myth: Faerie Tales, The Old West, Main Street, U.S.A. And the myths only have value as established by the rhetoric of the Walt Disney Company: "When truth and knowledge is defined in such a way and the discursive practices create these elements of the definition, there is little room to question the body of discourse that is Disneyland" (Foss and Gill 396). The key to this operation is complicity, voluntary suspension of disbelief on the part of the observer, which Baudrillard likens to an "infantile" response.

Such complicity is problematic however, as the willingness to participate implicitly in the simulations—that is, buying a ticket and entering the front gate—does not necessarily lead to a total acceptance of the originary structures which ground those simulations. As J. Derek Harrison states, "Most children are not fooled by electronic fantasies; on the contrary, they are curious to know 'how it works'" (183). What Baudrillard refers to as infantile is in fact an acknowledgement of a self-conscious position from which the simulation is both observed and critiqued. Few people are taken in by the illusions at Disney parks. Complicity in this context is the act of becoming a reader with the tacit knowledge that Disney is a text upon which the "real" world is not entirely excluded, but intrudes, thus problematizing the Inside/Outside binary.

The deconstruction of this binary also can be seen at the Disney/MGM Studios, where the orders of simulation become further intertwined. Here the myth is Hollywood, where cinema merges with reality. Both the myth of Hollywood is grounded in a real Hollywood, California—real buildings upon which many of the facades on "Hollywood Boulevard" are modeled: Grauman's Chinese Theater, The Brown Derby, and others. The interiors of these buildings are not identical to their counterparts (only The Brown Derby comes close). The inside of the Chinese Theater houses The Great Movie Ride, where classic films are privileged as historical artifacts: a pair of Dorothy's ruby slippers in the queue area, the plane from *Casablanca*, "John Wayne" wearing his namesake's own belt buckle. The facade itself, a famous movie theatre, becomes an artifact, but a self-conscious one which questions the authority of the film artifacts it contains. How can the classic movies simulated here be originary if the facade reminds us that they are simply projected images? And how can the facade be originary if it is only a simulation of Grauman's Chinese Theater in California?

But the act of complicity demands that the observer at least play along with the illusion. "Streetmosphere" characters are provided to enforce the rules of the game: Keystone Kops, autograph hounds, even a con man who invites passersby to a game of three-card monte, "all of whom populate this rosy image of Hollywood's heyday" (Birnbaum 159). Costumed characters serve a similar function over at the Magic Kingdom, but they are all explicitly fictional (Mickey Mouse, Donald Duck, etc.). At the Studios, and at EPCOT's World Showcase as well, these characters are supposed to be historically grounded. However, the tension generated among the structures of Hollywoods "historical," "idealized," and "Disneyfied" results in a radical slippage of referentiality. Where is the ground upon which the genetic structure of the Disney/MGM Studios stands?

But we are getting off track. Suffice it to say that the metaphors in operation



at the Disney/MGM Studios problematize the conventional genetics of history by replacing the hierarchical binary structure (origin/simulation) with a series of intertwining simulations whose individual truth-value cannot be grounded by ordinary logic. The simulated structures are both supported and undermined by the very act of complicity which allows the observer access to them. This problem of complicity is further seen in an attraction such as Star Tours, where the observer must deal with conflicting messages about the nature of the origin. Entering the queue area, one sees a forest on Endor. A level of suspension of disbelief becomes part of the experience—we “accept” that we are on Endor. However, only one side of the forest is “real”. The backs of trees, the right side of the Imperial Walker—these are revealed as elements of a “movie set,” a simulation that continues through the first few meters of the building itself. Then, turning a corner, we find a third simulation: a space port offering shuttle-trips to Endor (where the forest implied we already were). All three simulations operate in conflict, as does the ride itself, in which (due to a series of mishaps) the passengers never actually arrive at Endor, yet the participants are unloaded into a gift shop named “Endor Vendors”—right next to the forest! If complicity allows the observer to participate in the operation of simulation, then how is suspension of disbelief reconciled with the conflict among interacting simulations?

Perhaps this is a question one may also ask of history in general. What diffuses the paradox in this case is the acceptance of an origin and the evidence to back it up. This evidence is then given value through interpretation, reinscription into the canon of Historical discourse. Which leads back to de Man’s question: can a literature self-consciously be both historical and metaphoric? The question is asked of the larger issue of literary history, but an examination of the operation of metaphor in a historical literature may be of value here. We return to the concepts with which we began: the genetic pattern of history in the Hegelian sense, Nietzsche’s deconstruction of history as tragedy, and the hyperreality of Pleasure Island.

And we begin again with Merriweather Pleasure. His birthday (and that of both of his sons) is the same as that of the United States, in the same state (Pennsylvania), suggesting an important historical moment. Pleasure is the myth of America: the self-made man, the entrepreneur who plays the roles of commodities broker, metallurgist, engineer, land speculator, architect, botanist, adventurer, experimental chemist, and world traveler (and more). He is also the myth of Walt Disney: lost at sea and thus suspended between life and death (as Walt is cryogenically frozen), his empire wrecked by his irresponsible offspring (as Walt’s company suffered under the Ron Miller administration), and rediscovered by a force which encompasses both tradition and progress (as

Michael Eisner plays the role of the “new Walt” and replaces him as the father-figure of the revitalized Walt Disney Company).

Merriweather Pleasure is the father of Pleasure Island, its origin given authority by the presence of the historical documents. The nature of documentary evidence is such that it carries information that becomes privileged as an origin. As none of these histories is dated, there is no logical reason to assume that they might have preceded the existence of Pleasure Island itself. This is because of the conventional tropological structure of history, as described by Paul de Man, via Nietzsche, via Hegel. The genetic model is equivalent to the parental relationship: the Father engenders the Son, who then reinscribes/doubles the Father. There is a linear temporal pattern, but due to the act of doubling, in one sense, the Father and Son also exist simultaneously. de Man asserts that this paradox is not irreconcilable: “Yet this simultaneity does not disprove the persistence of a genetic model, since the parental relationship can be described as synchronic structures without in the least denying their genetic nature” (*Allegories* 85). In fact, this synchronic layering is “sturdier than the formal symmetries of the narrative plot” (*Allegories* 85), such narrative being linear in nature. The stability of history makes it more valuable in logocentric culture than linear narrative, because the constant reinscription of the origin allegedly accords it more truth-value.

But as Nietzsche demonstrates in *The Birth of Tragedy*, the act of opening both the origin and the structure which reinscribes it for the next cycle allows the genetic model of history to be deconstructed. As noted above, the history upon which Nietzsche focuses his attention is that of tragedy. Dionysus stands for the Father, which generates its own double, the Apollonian offspring. However, the act of doubling, of engendering, is a metaphoric turn.

The genetic version of the polarity Appearance/Thing is that of an entity that can be said to be identical with itself and that would engender, through a process of mediation, an appearance of which it is the origin and the foundation. Such a model can be understood in linguistic terms as the relationship between the figural and the proper meaning in a metaphor. (De Man, *Allegories* 90)

For Hegel, the structure is a closed loop: Father to son to Father, evolving only in the sense that the Father is only reinscribed in miniature. But the reinscription is subject to the movement of its metaphoricity. Because both the origin and the reinscription become points of tension between the referential (typified by “evidence” and “artifact”) and the indeterminacy generated by the tropological nature of language, the truth-value of the genetic model is thus



problematized.

And this is the case, in self-conscious terms, with the history of Pleasure Island. As noted, we have a History—four accounts in fact. Plaques on the various buildings mark points of historical interest, reinscribing the origin in a conventional fashion. In unconventional fashion, the Adventurer's Club simulates the process of writing history. The inside exists in a "time bubble" in which it is perpetually the 1930's, before Pleasure's disappearance (although curiously, Merriweather never physically appears at any Club events, nor is he pictured in any of the photos, many of which show friends and personal effects, displayed on the walls). Characters in the Club refer to events as if it were the late 1930's, with prop planes, radio broadcasts, cabaret shows, and other topical references ("Adventurer's Club Show Schedule"). In this way, Merriweather Pleasure is established as a living presence. However, outside the Adventurer's Club, Pleasure's life-time has passed. On the other hand, the Father never becomes permanently absent from the Island, because he has never died: "Known as the Grand Funmeister, Pleasure disappeared during his 1941 circumnavigation of the Antarctic" (Plaque 1: Pleasure Island South Entrance). No longer a physical presence, but never successfully erased through death, Merriweather Pleasure is the sign of *the origin under erasure*.

While this begins to call into question his authority as Father, another external factor undermines the authority of the written histories. A press release, dated May 1989 and printed under the auspices of the EPCOT Outreach Resource Service, Communicore West, EPCOT Center, makes the following remarkable statement:

Disney "Imagineers" have created a magic nighttime entertainment island which opened in spring of 1989. Plans for the six-acre Pleasure Island at WALT DISNEY WORLD Village were revealed on July 21, 1986, by Michael Eisner, chairman and chief executive of The Walt Disney Company, aboard the Empress Lily, a 19th century-style riverboat restaurant that is now part of the complex. ("Pleasure Island" 1)

This is Pleasure Island: six clubs (country, classic rock, dance pop, alternative, comedy, and the aforementioned Adventurer's Club), shops, food, live music, and a multiplex cinema. Each building "used" to be something else, parts of the "old" Pleasure Island that allegedly predates Disney. A plaque found attached to the Comedy Warehouse relates the following piece of history:

## POWER STATION

1912

This building became a storage facility when Pleasure Island was electrified in 1928. Six years later the Power Station became home to the Pleasure Thespian Players, founded by and featuring Isabella Pleasure, wife of Island founder and drama enthusiast Merriweather Pleasure. The Players specialized in elaborate Central Florida historical pageants, including the seminal "Song of the Seminole." After Mrs. Pleasure's death in 1949, the building was closed and the Players disbanded. Since its restoration by the Walt Disney Company, this site is again a warehouse, storing strange notions, aging attractions and ideas slightly ahead of their time. (Plaque 2)

Currently, visitors to the Comedy Warehouse may see an improv show while sitting surrounded by posters and props, some of them from real movies, some invented (a personal favorite is a display for the nonexistent EPCOT attraction "The Miracle of Croutons"). The other buildings also bear evidence of their past identities: the movie theatre was once Canvas Fabrication Plant #2, the Portobello Yacht Club restaurant was the Pleasure family home, the Disney memorabilia shop Yesteryears was "Pleasure Ltd. Chandlery and Tool Crib" (Plaque 11).

All this would indicate, if the plaques are taken at face value, that Pleasure Island does date back to the nineteenth century and was built by Merriweather Pleasure. However, if we return to the press release, a completely different origin arises. The Pleasure Island complex was designed by Walt Disney Imagineering and built by The Carlson Group. The construction time listed—"From August 1986 to May 1989" ("Pleasure Island" 2)—is considerably later than the plaques would have us believe. The movie theatre is operated by American Multi-Cinema; the new restaurants (Portobello Yacht Club and the Fireworks Factory—the Empress Lily was designed in 1971 by Disney and has never been to sea) are managed by The Levy World Company.

Which then is the historical origin: Merriweather Pleasure or The Walt Disney Company? Who is the Father: Pleasure or Eisner (or Walt Disney, whom Eisner has replaced)? Each alleges to predate the other and has the historical documentation to back up the claim. Thus the nature of the genetic origin of Pleasure Island is problematized.

However, with regard to Nietzsche's analysis of Hegel, the point of origin is not privileged in and of itself. It establishes its privileged position through



the act of reinscription performed by its offspring. In the case of Pleasure Island, a series of historical plaques exist which mark various buildings. They provide details of the history to any observer who reads them, thereby becoming complicitous in the act of reinscription. Again, the problem of complicity brings into question the hierarchy of competing simulations—in this case, the conflicting historical origins.

In conventional reinscription, the text does not reveal a self-conscious position towards its origin. However, the Pleasure Island plaques admit their metaphoricity:

A distillation of the unauthenticated adventures of Pleasure Island. .  
 . (Plaque 8)

For further unverifiable information. . . refer to the theoretical hysterical [sic] plaques. . . (Plaque 4)

The entire history of Pleasure Island is misrepresented on the plaques. . . (Plaque 13)

The historical authority of the plaques is established by the tropological structures which establish the authority of *all* history, by the act of simulation which recaptures the image of the Father. However, this authority is simultaneously devalued by its admitted falseness, its self-conscious use of metaphor. The history becomes akin to Nietzsche's characterization of tragedy as a dream:

Far from being a loss of consciousness, it remains persistently aware, even in its "sleep," of its illusory, fictional character, and it delights in this illusion. It is not a revealed consciousness, since it does not for a moment have the illusion that its illusions are reality. (De Man, *Allegories* 91)

Pleasure Island becomes a hyperreality, a reflection of its own self-consciously structured series of historical metaphors. The nature of history is such that it gains presence by the process of continually establishing and reinscribing an origin, and this history, that of Merriweather Pleasure and his island, is given a momentum of presence from that, from the accounts tacked to the walls and reenacted every night for the benefit of those willing to play along. It is reinscribed continually, the genetic pattern cycling through each night in an endless New Year's Eve celebration which closes off the system.

Yet even as Pleasure Island attempts to isolate time and space to establish

closure, the genetic structure of its history is opened up at both ends by its own tropological counter-momentum. Merriweather Pleasure operates under erasure, as his very presence as Father contains his absence as an authority over the Island. The historical documents that tell his life story conflict with a press release which establishes the Walt Disney Company as the ultimate authority. The plaques are admitted fictions. The entire history is devalued by its own admission: that it is a work of fiction, false before its inscription and after. It is a self-consciously false model on conventional history, as Baudrillard implies the hyperreal simulation should be: "Disneyland is there to conceal the fact that it is the 'real' country, all of 'real' America, which is Disneyland" (Baudrillard 25)

The questions raised by the genetic pattern of Pleasure Island, which is "able to maintain the literary aporia throughout" and can "account for literary modernity as well as for its historicity" (De Man, *Blindness* 164), are the questions which can be asked of all historical discourse as a form of simulation. Open at both ends in terms of meaning and thoroughly entertaining at its center, Pleasure Island successfully embodies the motto voiced by the absent Merriweather Pleasure: "All for fun, and fun for all!"

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*The Pleasure Island File*

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